

The Issue Is Freedom Of Speech

An organization such as the John Birch Society has the right to exist in a Democratic society.

It has the right to mount a patriotic attack against Communism, and to promote vigilance against ideologies running counter to democratic principle.

But the John Birch Society, if its function is based upon these principles, has a responsibility. The fact that it is currently under heavy criticism is simply because it has failed in various instances to be responsible not only to democratic principle, but to principles of its own.

When the leader of the society writes in a secretly circulated book that Milton Eisenhower, brother of former President Eisenhower, is a Communist, when he writes that "Dwight Eisenhower is a dedicated, conscious agent of the communist conspiracy," when he says that "civil rights" is a Communist slogan—and when all this is done with no supporting proof, then the Society and certainly its founder are open to criticism.

When its founder makes attacks on the loyalty of other American leaders such as former Secretary of State Dulles, and CIA Director Allen Dulles and does this with no supporting proof, then the society and its founder are open to criticism.

There are certainly those within the society who are sincere and intelligent enough to suspect and question such things. Rep. Edgar W. Hiestand (R-Calif.) is one of these. He has said he does not agree with Welch's charges against Eisenhower. But why hasn't he and others like him moved to do something about the situation?

But even Hiestand does not stand on solid ground, for he considers attacks against the society as part of a "pro-Communist" smear.

And this is something else the society best watch. People who criticize them are not automatically engaged in a pro-Communist smear. The right to criticize and question is a fundamental part of the democratic society. Anybody can rap an opponent with propaganda and name calling, but he doesn't win the argument without reason and fact.

There is but one issue at stake in the furor over the society. It involves the guarantee of freedom of speech. The issue is—has the society gone beyond the guarantee.

The guarantee of freedom of speech in this country is not a guarantee without responsibility. It is framed by laws of libel and laws of moral integrity. It requires truth rather than insinuation. It requires truth rather than subversion.

Frankly we do not know whether the John Birch Society is a subversive organization, whether it is anti-semitic, whether it is anti-segregationist, or whether it is radical as it is being charged.

We do feel that from the evidence available it has not always acted responsibly. And whether it is just one or two or three in the organization who are responsible for the suspicion and criticism it makes no difference. The best of any organization must take the blame for its worst.

The John Birch Society had best take stock of itself. By overstepping the guarantee of freedom of speech and expression it can defeat its own purpose, and it does it by resorting to tactics practiced by those they say they fight—the Communists.

We would like to see a good anti-Communist organization in this country, but we would not like to see it smash the principles of democracy in the process.